

A
A
0
0
0
6
2
1
3
7
6
3



LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Two Shillings and Sixpence Net

NOEL

AN EPIC IN TEN CANTOS

BY GILBERT CANNAN

///

PART TWO

CANTOS I AND II

LONDON

GRANT RICHARDS LTD

ST MARTIN'S STREET

AG-1 N₁

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

CANTO ONE



CANTO I

My hero's name is Higgins, though for that
He is no less a hero than Tom Jones,
No less a shining peak above the flat
And smoky waste where human nature groans
And moans and mopes while Care, who killed the cat,
Creeps like an ague through men's aching bones.
His Christian names are James Mulready Noel,
Born in the land of Eckstein, Beit and Joel.

How strange that anything so innocent
As children should be gotten in a land
Where men on gold and gain are so intent
That human life is but as dust or sand
To trickle through their fingers ! Still the bent
Of men and women living on the Rand
Is much the same as elsewhere and they get
Themselves tied up in procreation's net.

His father was a cad of gentle birth,
More caddish therefore than a low-bred cur.
His mother was the gentlest soul on earth,
And Noel had his qualities from her :
His charm, his force, his never-failing mirth
Which bubbles through his story sinister,
Whose golden thread illumines this narration
Of Glory, Empire and the British Nation.

His mother's history is too, too sad,
 For she was married to a clergyman
 And did not like him, but preferred the bad,
 Bold Guardsman, Henry Higgins, and they ran
 Away together, being both half mad
 With love and reckless of the cruel ban
 Which England lays upon illicit lovers,
 On those at least whom recklessness discovers.

It was not Henry's first experience,
 Though it was hers, and she was in revolt
 And ran him off his legs, to the intense
 And frigid horror of that frisky colt,
 Who had till then been reined by common-sense.
 Love shot his dart and Ellen shot her bolt,
 And found herself divorced and isolated
 With Henry Higgins, whom she shortly hated.

But for my hero's sake they went before
 The registrar and made his birth legitimate,
 And said good-bye to England's chalk-white shore.
 And Henry found he had a shrewd and witty mate,
 While Ellen saw in him a fearful bore,
 An even more unkind and gritty mate
 Than he whom she had left to weep and rage
 In his dull, damp and dingy parsonage.

Such tragedies are common and produce
 Not seldom heroes, since the woman throws
 The thwarted passion which has broken loose
 Into the bearing of her child. She goes
 Unmated, but in this she finds her use,
 Her aim, her end, the deepest truth she knows.
 Such births are virgin, for the carnal act
 Has left the maiden spirit quite intact.

Expelled by Church and State, the couple fled
 To Africa, that refuge of the wrecked.
 Their kinsfolk calmly thought of them as dead
 And said: "What else could anyone expect? . . ."
 And: "As they've made so they must lie their bed . . ."
 Etcetera. Such phrases disinfect
 The families of couples who disown
 The moral chains which cut them to the bone.

Of course it turned out badly, though no worse
 Than ninety-five per cent. of marriages.
 For marriage is the pompous plumèd hearse,
 Wherein Love's corpse through life escorted is:
 Dead love, dead hope, dead men and women curse,
 Yet still support this worst of tragedies,
 In double harness bearing to the grave
 The long-dead love they have no power to save.

Some people think of multi-millionaires
 As men endowed with brains beyond the norm,
 And iron wills to thrust aside the cares
 Of common life and free their limbs to storm
 The citadel of Fate and climb the stairs
 Of Fame themselves with power to inform.
 But millionaires are after all but human,
 Dependent like the rest on pleasing Woman.

The part that Woman plays in I.D.B.,
 In I.G.B. and in illicit liquor
 Would horrify the innocents who see
 In Empire proof that blood is always thicker
 Than water and are blind to villainy
 Which uses blood as a cement or sticker.
 The origins of fortunes oft are shady.
Cherchez la femme. Anglicé: Seek the lady.

So Henry Higgins found when on the Rand,
 He sought his broken fortunes to repair.
 And he a stranger in a foreign land
 Had more temptation than his soul could bear.
 With so much easy villainy to hand,
 He could not help but take his dirty share.
 His Ellen suffered but could not prevent
 Her Guardsman from a headlong swift descent.

Great days were those when Englishmen and Jews
 Were out to diddle Dutchmen and the niggers,
 When heroes from the ghettos and the stews
 Of Europe did such sleight of hand with figures
 That simple men were almost glad to lose
 Their all and let the frenzied swarm of diggers
 Destroy old homesteads, farms and cherished places
 And flood them with the scum of all the races.

Great days indeed, when Jews and Englishmen
 Bought, cheated, gambled, swindled, filched, decoyed,
 Rigged, salted, boomed, defaulted now and then,
 And bragged and blustered and were quite annoyed,
 Quite seriously agitated, when
 The Dutch Republics legal rights employed
 To keep their lands from being all devoured,
 Their simple folk from being overpowered.

Plunged in this welter, Henry wholly lost
 His moral code and soon up to the neck
 Was plunged in tricks which acted like a frost
 Upon his marriage. Soon he was a wreck,
 And sold himself at something less than cost
 Unto a Jew and lived upon his beck
 And nod, which meant his henceforth dealing
 In what at home he would have loathed as stealing.

But British morals never stand transplanting.
 What's wrong at home is quite all right abroad.
 The British race apparently is wanting
 In critical intelligence and floored
 Are other races whose oblique and slanting
 Wits wake to find their claims and rights ignored.
 This happened with the Dutch, whose simple piety
 Could never cope with Anglo-Yid society.

The part that Henry played in gobbling up
 The two Republics must remain ambiguous.
 'Tis certain that he filled his Ellen's cup
 With bitterness. Her love grew more exiguous.
 In fact, of love she had nor bite nor sup
 Once Henry Higgins learned to thimblorig, you, us,
 Posterity and God's great self to swindle,
 The British patriotic fire to kindle.

Enough! My hero knew naught of the welter
 Of roguery that sent up Dr Jim
 To rush the Rand and drive out helter-skelter
 Oom Paul and those who tolerated him,
 And naught of those who cravenly took shelter
 When London vetoed Cecil Rhodes' whim.
 My hero never realised till later
 How he had played by a volcano's crater.

Like Goethe Noel had his Frohnatur
 Vom Mütterchen. O! rarely can a child
 Have had so very little to endure
 As he from her who let his soul grow wild
 And know no stint that he might be so pure
 As never by the world to be defiled.
 For Ellen knew that if a soul is free
 It flies its way unharmed through misery.

She let him find his feet in everything,
 And neither scolded nor gave too much aid,
 But answered questions frankly when the sting
 Of curiosity his childhood frayed.
 She suffered when the boy in him took wing
 And childish things and fancies down he laid.
 She suffered when the man began to grope
 Through boyhood, menacing her every hope.

She suffered when his nerves began to ache
 For maiden comfort and the exquisite
 Delight of living for another's sake.
 She suffered when he was ashamed of it,
 And vowed he never, never would partake
 Of joys that did not them more closely knit.
 She took all risks in utter confidence
 That joy's a surer guide than common-sense.

She let him have his joy ; that was her rule ;
 His joy in all things good and bad, and taught him
 Himself to judge the things he learned at school,
 And doing so continually brought him
 To disbelieve in things that any fool
 Would see through if the system had not caught him.
 He quickly learned the things he wished to know,
 But things he did not wish he just let go.

She let him have his joy and he increased it
 A thousandfold and hers by increment.
 His life was freehold and he never leased it,
 But gave it freely to the innocent,
 And by the giving found he had released it
 From all the weight of moral argument.
 "It's only Noel," greeted all his actions.
 His very lapses seemed like benefactions.

So wonderful is Grace. No moral code
 Can thwart it, nor no punishment defame
 Its power to turn the human sinner's road
 Into a flowered path, a field aflame
 With poppies of oblivion. The goad
 Of conscience and the knotted whips of shame
 Are useless where true Grace has touched the mind
 And given sight to eyes that else are blind.

So Ellen let her son loose like a colt,
 To find himself the uses of his limbs
 And mind and soul and organs, that revolt
 Might never drive him into frenzied whims
 As it had driven her to shoot her bolt
 Against the Church, the Prayer Book and the hymns
 Interminable, blasphemous and dreary
 Of which she had been heart-sick and dog-weary.

She never talked of England save to tell
 How it was beautiful beyond all other places,
 And of the valley underneath Ill Bell
 Where she had dreamed in girlhood of the faces
 Would live around her in the lovely spell
 Of happiness and love. She marked her traces
 Through all the rich and varied island scene
 And pondered wistfully what might have been.

She talked of Cambridge and the haunted Backs
 Where ancient trees keep centuries alive,
 Of Sussex downs where nut-brown shepherds wax
 In years and seem the only men to thrive
 As men once throve before their wretched backs
 Were burdened with the weight of the great hive
 Of industry created in the island
 So wet with tears that it's no longer dry land.

She talked of Thames and Severn and the Avon,
 And Shakespeare's town and Shakespeare's lovely work,
 Of Ayr and Burns, and country-sides all paven
 With poets' thoughts, bright flowers in the murk,
 Of beauty so indelibly engraven
 On England that the English vainly shirk.
 For Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron
 Defy the inroads of the age of iron.

She talked of Turner, Constable and Crome
 And all the beauty captured by their art,
 To show how Englishmen defile their home
 And every day betray it in the mart.
 Through memories of beauty she would roam,
 To bring her son into her inmost heart.
 Her memories and fancies were most free
 When she remembered places by the sea.

The salted marshes of the Kentish coast,
 The Cornish cliffs, the sands of Robin's Bay,
 Clovelly brought a still entrancing host
 Of memories as it were yesterday.
 These sea-bird thoughts were ever Ellen's most
 Belovèd, and to think them was to pray.
 These were her England, these she laid before
 Her son and wisely told him nothing more.

The history of England is the sea.
 Kings, statesmen, priests and soldiers disappear.
 The waves creep up out of the mystery
 Of sea and sky, and men are born to peer
 Into that mystery, and seek the key
 In vain, as each wave asks its human tear.
 The hungry waves creep up and slowly break,
 While hearts with stale and unlived living ache.

The history of England is the sea,
 That drenches all save the poetic fire
 That is unquenchable, and burning free
 Sends through the English soul a fierce desire,
 The equal of the sun's, for liberty,
 Creation and the music of the choir
 Of all the spheres, the music universal
 Whereof this world is but the first rehearsal.

So this was England to my hero, just
 A dream of sea and ships and soft green dells,
 And nothing learned he of the filthy crust
 Of smoke and money and the divers hells
 That thicken it until the English must
 Destroy or be destroyed to keep the swells
 Who run the Anglo-Yiddish Empire fattened,
 And every other kind of creature flattened.

In hot parched Africa to think in dreams
 Of fat rich meadows, countless running rills,
 Green woods, slow rivers, waving grass that teems
 With chirping life, and rolling turfy hills!
 In such a heat as yonder England seems
 A Paradise that satisfies and fills
 The inmost longing of the exiled soul
 That quite forgets that England's black with coal.

So Noel dreamed of England, where his sires
 Had loved the scenes of which his mother told,
 Had stamped their character upon the shires
 Where they had lived, had won in days of old
 The honourable title of Esquires,
 And looked for honour rather than for gold.
 Such tales as these made it seem rather funny
 To Noel that his father crawled to money.

Now money in the person of the Beits,
 Barnatos, Rhodes and persons of that kind
 Was chivalrously asking for the rights
 Of citizens for Britons come to find
 A living 'mid the riotous delights
 Of Jo'burg—or perhaps 'twas but a blind
 To Anglicise the Rand and make suburban
 The continent from Salisbury to Durban.

About the whole intrigue as usual
 The Muse of History has gravely lied,
 Suppressing all the more sensational
 And vulgar details lest our British pride
 Should suffer. When the Muse has quibbled shall
 The poet on the naked truth decide?
 If gold is wanted for the British Mint,
 Then poets like the Muses learn to squint.

Enough to say that Rhodes and Beit & Co.,
 With fortunes based on smuggling from the mines
 Through Kafir ladies, wanted more and so
 Began to work and scheme along the lines
 Laid down long since for men who wish to go
 To war to plunder Naboth of his vines.
 And it so happened that in England cartridges
 Were made too quick for pheasants, grouse and partridges.

When cartridges are made too fast for birds
 And beasts, and shareholders want markets, then,
 When they can no more be fobbed off with words,
 Such ammunition can be used on men.
 What men? The Foreign Secretary girds
 His loins and marks the quarry with his pen.
 Then some small nation is accused of knavery
 And branded as the champion of slavery.

It generally happens that they own
 Rich mines or oils or cocoanuts, but that
 Is incidental, just a makeweight thrown
 Into the scales of justice. What we're at,
 We British, is to force the Freedom grown
 In England on the proletariat
 Of every other country, so that they
 May help the costs of Empire to defray.

The Beits had costly houses in Park Lane.
 (That they were Germans did not matter then.)
 That Boers should slight them went against the grain
 Of British pride. The Boers then were the men
 Marked down by Kynoch's products to be slain
 With sanction voted underneath Big Ben.
 Shall it be said that Britain's grand democracy
 Will not defend its Yiddish aristocracy?

But nothing knew my hero of the coil
 In which his father and the British were entangled.
 He never let his elders' folly spoil
 The dreams of youth, with starry splendour spangled,
 That held him rapt. So while the Hebrews toil
 To have the Dutch republics smashed and mangled
 He toils to please the object of his calf love
 Whom he could only miserably half love.

A very young man thinks that women are
 As lovely as the feelings they awaken.
 For as a poet gazing on a star
 Can dream a world, so youthful hearts when shaken
 By puberty are wonderfully far
 From thinking they are possibly mistaken.
 When Noel wished to know how women are made
 He wasted his first love upon a barmaid.

He loved her truly but was horrified
 When she proposed that he should give her what
 She coveted, a night spent by his side.
 The mere suggestion made his forehead hot,
 And when 'twas done he thought of suicide
 To make an end of his most wretched lot.
 It tortured him to think he had defiled
 Her. When he told her of it she was riled.

She shrieked with laughter and he hotly fled,
 Pursued with raucous titters of derision,
 And wept to see this first love lying dead,
 His love that had been as a vivid vision.
 It left him with a fiercely aching head,
 A soul that ached and twinged with indecision.
 He rode until he reached a river's brim.
 There would he drown. He had a jolly swim.

His second love is not worth mentioning.
 His third, a Dutch girl, gave him even more
 Than he could dream and he felt like a king,
 Like Fortinbras arrived in Elsinore.
 This girl was musical and she could sing
 The operas of Wagner *sans* the score.
 This may account for more than one romantic
 Adventure which may seem extreme and antic.

They loved and loved so ardently and well
 That Love was Noel's only education.
 In terms of love he saw the miracle
 Of life, the endless fierce creation
 Of worlds sent spinning dizzily to hell,
 World after world with no hope of cessation.
 But sunlight, earth and love were quite enow,
 With pleasure at the helm, youth at the prow.

And incidentally my hero learned
 How Englishmen and Jews had squeezed the Dutch
 Wherever gold and diamonds were upturned.
 How they had given little for the much
 They coveted : how British troops had burned
 And sacked and raped that British hands might touch
 And make Imperial the golden soil
 On which the Dutchmen wasted all their toil.

Where Dutchmen cultivated corn and mealies
 And vines and peaches, oranges and nuts,
 Are mines and dumps, and men with whom to steal is
 Just Business, which the door on morals shuts.
 And the result of every British deal is
 Just money—the unkindest of all cuts—
 Instead of peace and happiness and work :
 Just money and the moneyed right to shirk.

And bitter tales had Noel's love to make him
 Almost ashamed to be of British birth,
 And yet she could not altogether shake him
 In his belief that nowhere on this earth
 Was such a land as England, and to wake him
 Was impossible when he avowed the worth
 Of British dreams and poetry and history.
 He tried in vain to make her love that mystery.

In vain. Katrina only knew the worst,
 The greed, the callous lust for gold and power.
 And she believed her people to be curst
 Because in an unhappy, careless hour
 They had agreed to slake the British thirst
 For land, and let them have the very flower
 Of Africa's "illimitable veldt"
 In their Imperial crucible to melt.

And she believed a curse was on her folk
 Because the mines had disinterred the dead.
 For that, she said, they well deserved the yoke
 Of slavery descending on the head
 Of every Boer, and when the storm-cloud broke
 She prophesied that England would be bled
 A thousandfold for every corpse disturbed
 Before the vengeance of the dead was curbed.

This talk of curses gave a tragic twist
 To love that was idyllically young,
 Most rare, most beautiful. Had Noel wist
 How it would end he might perhaps have sung
 Less boyishly his love, and might have kissed
 More deeply had he known how Katje clung
 To this which was the passion of her life.
 He was her husband. She was not his wife.

She knew it, but was kind and never told him,
 Nor ever made a murmur of complaint.
 His childishness annoyed her, but to scold him
 Was beyond her, though she must sometimes feint
 And dodge his foolish ardour, when to hold him
 Was hard enough to aggravate a saint.
 He loved her, but was maddeningly blind
 To all the deeper movements of her mind.

And loving her he learned to love the land
 That bred her with its hot and zestful air,
 Its mystery that lies on every hand
 Absorbing all and making all things wear
 A passionate aspect. To understand
 The love which he was wonted to declare
 So easily, our hero had to shed
 The British prejudice in him inbred.

That was Katrina's task, and she set to it
 As though her life depended, as indeed
 It did, upon her power to win through it
 Before the storm she felt made nations bleed.
 She broke in Noel, though he never knew it,
 The fear which is the source of British greed,
 The fear of giving anything away
 For fear of what the next-door neighbours say.

For it is far, far better to be rich
 Than good, but it is better to be good
 Than poor. There is the moral basis which
 Upholds the Empire and is understood
 So perfectly by those who strive to hitch
 New countries on, who, losing nationhood,
 Are told that they have gained in liberty—
 A statement which they do not always see.

Katrina understood it not at all
 And took good care that Noel should not either,
 For she believed in riding for a fall.
 When she must choose she wanted both or neither.
 She wanted Noel, wanted to forestall
 The sufferings which he must soon bequeath her,
 By waking in him some more rare capacity
 Than is required by unalloyed rapacity.

And she succeeded marvellously well,
 So well that he had not the faintest tinge
 Of British morals left in him. The knell
 Was sounded of those terrors that impinge
 Upon the Briton's mind when feelings swell
 His manly bosom, threatening t'unhinge
 The lid which on emotion he has jammed
 To make quite sure that he shall ne'er be damned.

So for a while Katrina had her way
 And Noel learned the height and depth of passion
 As it can live in maidens who don't play
 With love, but go all out in reckless fashion
 And nothing care for what they have to pay.
 She taught him that it's better far to dash on
 And get the thing you want than to postpone
 And lose the chance of making love your own.

For in a moving world true safety lies
 In movement. There is nothing to be gained
 By standing still and hoping that a prize
 Will heave in sight and haply be retained.
 Katrina knew this and her Noel's eyes
 She opened to her passion unrestrained.
 And her delight in him was only heightened
 To know that he was not the least bit frightened.

They loved and no one knew that they had tasted
 Love's deepest joys. They loved and no one knew
 That not a drop of their fine youth was wasted,
 For all had gone to make the world anew.
 Life seemed so short. They rode the wind and hasted
 To overtake the white clouds as they flew.
 Among the stars at night they raced delighted
 And sipped the honey of each moon they sighted.

Young love has wings. Young love on music rises
 And leaves the world to go on growing old,
 And men and women changing their disguises
 And trying to forget that they are cold,
 Worn out and bored and dead to the surprises
 That mock the world where all is bought and sold.
 Young Love in Noel and Katrina made
 Them welcome even the great price they paid.

The price was heavy, for her father, who
 For years had been engaged in running guns
 From Delagoa Bay, surprised the two
 Like Candide and his Cunegonde. His sons
 He called, great giants, who then took and threw
 Young Noel out as children throw their buns
 To bears in Zoos, and left him stunned and lying
 Half dead with grief to hear Katrina crying.

He crept away, but waited through the night,
 And in the dawn she came to him and said
 Her brothers were prepared to shoot at sight,
 If he should ever show his British head
 Upon their land, for they were in a fright
 Lest he should spy and peep into the shed
 Where guns and shells and rounds of ammunition
 Were stored while Rhodes manœuvred for position.

Her father and her brothers knew the part
 That Noel's father, Henry Higgins, played
 In seeing that Oom Paul was in the cart
 In spite of his defeat of Jameson's Raid.
 That being so, although it wrenched her heart,
 She thought it best to see that Noel stayed
 Away from her, and they arranged to meet
 By stealth sometimes at Jo'burg in the street.

Hearts nearly broke when suddenly there came
 The news that war had been declared. The spark
 Fell on the land, and soon the rushing flame
 Burned fiercely, and its smoke made life grow dark,
 All hope grow dim and dwindle into shame.
 The British took to arms just for a lark,
 But for the Dutch 'twas life and death, a fight
 For home and honour, freedom and the light.

For Noel in his youth it was as though
 Great Britain had made war upon his love.
 How could he care if Kruger was too slow
 For Cecil Rhodes and those who try to shove
 The British flag as fast as it can go
 About the earth—too fast, though, for the dove
 Of peace, because the bird insists on leisure
 And giving all men time to take their pleasure.

He nothing knew but that a foul excitement
 Had seized his friends and blown their lives to hell.
 Each side drew up a charge-sheet and indictment
 To prove that all the horrors that befell
 Were well deserved, because the bloody fight meant
 That truth was out to ring the liar's knell.
 Which was the liar? Nations disagree
 And fight like Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

But in this case the Dutchman, Tweedledum,
 Was not one-tenth the size of Tweedledee,
 The Englishman, who banged his noisy drum
 And screamed as usual of Liberty.
 In Freedom's name the khaki thousands come.
 The world looks on, pretending not to see,
 Because no other nation's strong enough
 To cry out "Shame" upon Great Britain's bluff.

Katrina vanished. Noel was removed
 To Durban, there to simmer in regret
 And there to guard his mother, as behoved
 A boy too young to wield a bayonet,
 And e'er to doubt what Chamberlain had proved,
 That Kruger had the Lion in his net.
 But Noel only knew his love was slain
 And did not care a damn for Chamberlain.

Gigantic Boers had thrashed and nearly killed him.
 But he'd have done the same had he a sister.
 He lived again the story, and it thrilled him
 To think of Katje and how he had kissed her.
 The thought of her gigantic brothers filled him
 With memories that acted like a blister
 Upon his love and made him hate the row
 That filled the scene of his young idyll now.

Because he was pro-Katje he could not
 Conceal the fact that he was ardently
 Pro-Boer. His feelings made the place too hot
 And he was forced to take his misery
 To Cape Town, where Great Britain shortly shot
 The armies she had shipped across the sea,
 Cook's son and Duke's both sent to Table Bay
 While Kipling killed Paul Kruger with his lay.

Now Noel had this pull o'er me and you
 That we saw nothing but the khaki show,
 The cheering troops dispatched from Waterloo,
 Believing they had only got to go
 To make quite sure the sea was just as blue
 In Africa as in the Channel, so
 That Britons wheresoe'er they choose to halt
 Should still remember that the sea is salt.

In Cape Town with his mother Noel saw
 The fifty thousand horse and foot arrive
 In Table Bay and shortly martial law
 Made life a horror to all things alive.
 The army thrust the city down its maw
 Just like a bear with honey from a hive.
 If this is how an army treats its friends,
 What will it do when let loose on its ends?

Now things were done in Cape Town which won't bear
 Retailing. As the army must be fed,
 Civilians must go short, for who's to care
 If helpless households are left short of bread
 Because the bodies of young men who wear
 A uniform must be kept plump for lead
 Propelled by hostile guns to smash them,
 And hostile bayonets to jab and gash them ?

And who's to care if maidens are excited
 By males so many and so brutally
 Robust ? And who's to care if they are slighted
 And left to face a pregnant misery ?
 Who ever cares to see that wrongs are righted
 When they are done by a community ?
 But Noel cared, and all the things he saw
 Made his young soul revolt from martial law.

His thoughts took refuge in remembered dreams
 Of Love beneath the ever-wheeling stars.
 Now comes the moon to shed her clement gleams
 Athwart the vision's cruel prison bars.
 Love from the lovers kindly she redeems,
 Else is their love the wickedest of wars
 That blasts and blights the holy central realm
 That human follies sinfully o'erwhelm.

Observe the lily how she proudly bears
 Her head and gives the perfume of her being
 In utter freedom to the moving airs
 That waft her music to the holy gleeing
 Abounding in the universe. She wears
 No visionary mantle, but agreeing
 In love and death she loves before she dies
 And gives delight to bees and butterflies.

O lovely lily waxen-white as death,
 O lily white as love's extreme delight,
 Thou emblem of the utter linkèd breath
 That comes in lovers' kisses in the night,
 Thou innocence, for whom love labourèth,
 Be thou the sign of love in mortal sight.
 Dream of the rose and dream the red rose pale.
 Beyond all dreams in love are lilies frail.

Hardly has life a sweeter joy than this,
 To see the loved one lie in happy sleep,
 The sleep that ends the tender after-kiss
 And seals the treasure conjured from the deep,
 Embalming love in the enchanted bliss
 That creeps as mists from water-meadows creep
 And fill the moonlight valleys with a shroud
 Of silver while the singing birds are loud.

So Noel dreams in Cape Town while the men
 Who'd come to murder Katje's kinsmen made
 A little hell to make them ready when
 They went forth to the greater they were paid
 To make because Sir Alfred Milner's pen
 Would not unsay the follies it had said.
 Sir Alfred's mind, obsessed by his bureau,
 Insisted that a wound-up clock must go.

That clocks can ever stop had never dawned
 Upon the minds of Milner and his clerks.
 So having wound theirs up they sat and yawned,
 And never saw the shower of red sparks
 That fell upon South Africa. They scorned
 To think of anything except the marks
 They'd won in passing for the Service Civil.
 Their minds stopped there; their brains went to the devil.

In Cape Town Milner did in little what
 Much later he achieved in large ; *id est*,
 He gathered up a horde of clerks to squat
 Upon a country's life and interest.
 He did it not to serve some wicked plot,
 But just because he thought it right and best.
 The bureaucratic mind is bounded by
 Its bureau, where intelligence must die.

Behold in Cape Town bedded out the seeds
 Of Prussian Britain practising the art
 Of Bureaucratic war against the weeds
 Of Liberty grown rankly in the heart
 Of Boerdom. For the appetite still feeds
 Its growth, and now Sir Alfred Milner, Bart.,
 Had seized his chance to practise on the weak
 The God-like System he believed unique.

Sir Alfred Milner passed in very high
 And had the maximum of marks, which made him
 Imagine he was swept up to the sky
 Elijah-like to see the folk who paid him,
 And had no marks, all labouring to try
 To meet his bills. And nobody gainsaid him.
 And so he did just what he damn well pleased,
 And had the Boers and British tightly squeezed.

The Boers had marvelled greatly that a man
 Like this should represent Great Britain while
 Great Britain still declared it was her plan
 To free all slaves. They knew not British guile.
 They knew not how the British nation can
 Crush little nations with a pious smile
 And unctuously talk of liberty
 What time they practise rape and piracy.

The British Isles were made for pirate chiefs
 Who thither flock from every land and clime,
 Russ, German, Jew, Levantine, bringing griefs
 And sorrows in their train, and every time
 Great Britain goes to war for her beliefs
 They drag her through the grime and bloody slime
 Of war for loot and gold and precious stones
 Got out of pawn with dead men's bleached bones.

But nothing Noel knew of Milner, Bart.,
 Or Buchan, Duncan, Curtis and the crew
 Of elegant young men who got their start
 From Balliol, which warped their mental view.
 His instinct, frightened, whispered to his heart
 That here was something wrong, for he well knew
 The quality of Katje's giant brothers.
 How mean by contrast were these khaki others!

So sick at heart he watched the troops arrive,
 The transports and the stores, the knitted socks,
 The belly-bands, the women who contrive
 To get attached to armies, till the rocks
 Of Table Bay were littered and alive
 With wasted clothes, tobacco, women, stocks
 Of cigarettes and food, tough beef and weevil'd biscuit,
 Food left so long that no sane man would risk it.

And Noel saw the Generals whom I
 Remember only as adorning buttons.
 French, Plumer, Buller, Kitchener go by
 As gay as parrot tulips grown by Suttons'.
 He heard big talk of how the Boers would fly,
 How they'd be packed off quickly to their muttons.
 In spite of all the noise and glare and glitter
 It hardly moved him more than sparrows' twitter.

Nothing could move him since his love was dead,
 Blown up by war and British dynamite.
 It seemed to Noel that his luckless head
 Had been selected by some angel's spite
 To bear the weight of all the sinful dead
 Had piled up till it reached High Heaven's height
 To call down thence the mighty wrath of God
 To make men drench with blood the living sod.

Black, black indeed, for Noel's life at home
 Grew daily worse. His father's wealthy Jew
 Had got the honey from his honeycomb
 And packed off back to Hamburg, there to view
 In dreams the golden conquest of the foam
 With German dyes to dye it Prussian blue.
 And Noel's father Henry was left landed
 With debts, collapsed, irreparably stranded.

In Cape Town Henry stormed and wept and raged,
 But Ellen did not care a single damn,
 And waited till his wrath was half assuaged
 Then let him know she thought it all a sham.
 She'd seen this coming as it had been staged,
 The fatal end of Henry's small "I am."
 Male egoism's comic to the woman
 Who has her boy to keep her warm and human.

She said his place was with his regiment,
 And Henry's Public School boy code of "form"
 Cropped up and shook his later Jo'burg bent
 For looking out for wreckage in a storm.
 He donned the khaki and was shortly sent
 Up-country, where the Boers were said to swarm
 Upon the brown illimitable veldt
 Beyond which lay the coveted gold belt.

There Henry lived through two most famous fights
 And lost a stone in weight, and rose to be
 A Major for discovering the sights
 Of all the rifles were quite useless. He
 Was sent to Cape Town, where the lurid nights
 Would make another scabrous Odyssey,
 For there were ladies who had little else on
 Than Impudence to brighten the Mount Nelson.

Poor Henry, come to raise a horrid scandal
 About his rifles, fell into another
 Anent those rifling triflers who the candle
 Were burning at both ends, because no other
 Illuminant was there for them to handle.
 The light in men is very hard to smother,
 And Cape Town must have been a dreary hole
 To young men used to play a sparkish rôle.

Poor Henry had to pay the price of being caught
 In lechery while others with immunity
 Did much the same but took care that they bought
 And paid for and enjoyed it with impunity.
 But Henry lighted on a damsel who had brought
 Her husband with her and in perfect unity
 She worked with him, and made a horrid bloomer,
 Thought Henry rich but found he was a stumer.

So she made trouble. Henry had to go.
 The disappointed husband thrashed him till
 He could not see for pain, to let him know
 That Jack must have his price for sharing Jill.
 Cold then was Afric, cold as Arctic snow
 To Henry now that Fortune seemed to fill
 His belly full of snowballs and his soul
 With gall, his heart with fiercely burning coal.

The uncorrected rifles still were sent up
 To keep the British army well equipped.
 And Henry, with his righteous fury pent up,
 Felt like a child who's been unjustly whipped.
 And with a gang of raw recruits he went up
 To see them in their bath of fire dipped.
 He led them in a brave but futile charge,
 And on the scroll of fame he is writ large.

No need for me to tell the deed he did,
 The deed that did him in and twenty score
 Of blackguards who weren't sorry to be rid
 Of Fortune who had shown herself a whore,
 A strumpet who would take the highest bid
 And then refuse because it was not more.
 They had one blinding flash of beastly lust,
 One crowded hour, and then were dust to dust.

The whole affair was one more Staff mistake.
 A kopje which by rights should dominate
 A river's bend was found in fact to make
 The river's other bank—of course too late.
 Two regiments were trapped and for their sake
 Three more were sent to share their hapless Fate.
 Their Fate was an old General whose map
 Would keep on falling from his short-legged lap.

He lost his temper so that he could not
 Remember where precisely he had stuck
 The pins that stood for regiments. He got
 So flustered that he trusted to his luck,
 Which, backed by the conceit of a true Scot,
 Had raised him steadily above the ruck,
 Without his learning more than how to be
 Impressive in his bland stupidity.

He had the gift of silence, and a face
 Most like a wedge of Cheddar cheese or like
 An uncooked ham, and women had no place
 In his philosophy, but as the hoarding shriek
 Will keep dead bees, the trophies of the chase,
 Impaling them upon a thorny spike,
 So he with medals, orders, on his chest
 Pinned all his life, and banished all the rest.

Such men are trusted with the lives and dreams
 Of thousands, with the fate of millions.
 The treasure of a nation's poured in streams
 To keep them well equipped with men and guns,
 While other men whose noble fancy teems
 With fruitful thought must count their pence by ones
 And twos and threes, and starve for ammunition
 With which to set out bravely on their mission.

This man could never face a fact, and what
 He did was right because he did it. Q. E.
 D. It never struck this most successful Scot
 That others paid for what he failed to do. He
 Had often had a drunken Tommy shot
 When he himself was more than common screwy.
 And yet his heart belied his wooden features,
 'Twas soft, but never for his fellow-creatures.

A thousand men were for this famous man
 A thousand uniforms and bayonets
 Supplied, in much the same way as a hen
 Supplies her eggs, by Government, which sets
 No limit on expenditure of men.
 "Lest we forget." But everyone forgets
 The cost of glory, aye, and glory's self,
 Once a campaign is laid by on the shelf.

A soldier knows his candle is but brief,
 A tallow dip to gutter in the sun,
 And he has but a very short relief
 From peace and boredom. When the war is won
 Or lost, then he must fall back like a leaf
 Raised by the wind and made to dance and run
 A little time and then to flutter down
 To rest with other leaves decayed and brown.

Now Henry's gang of raw recruits were told
 To march across to join the Fusiliers
 Who, as the plan of tactics should unfold,
 Would treat the Boers as Mr Wackford Squeers
 Thought fit to treat the boy who caught a cold—
 That is, they'd make them see that British cheers,
 C—H—double E—R—S, can spell
 Defeat, as likewise double L spells hell.

So Henry set his British blackguards cheering
 And rushed across to where the other troops
 Were—by the map. Instead they saw appearing
 The enemy in skilfully placed groups,
 Who coolly set about the task of shearing
 The British Army, which with groans and whoops
 Stood still a moment and then rushed ahead,
 The living all forgetful of the dead.

The Fusiliers for weeks had hardly had
 A chance of getting in a single shot.
 They had been used to illustrate a fad
 Of a Staff Officer who had then got
 His orders from our G.H.Q. which, sad
 To tell, had realised that things were not
 The same as Autumn Grand Manœuvres,
 But war and death were merciless removers

Of men and reputations and the vanity
 That makes life gay and picturesque,
 They leave but little room for that inanity
 Which makes a man who blunders at a desk
 The arbiter of parcels of humanity.
 Poor human men so helpless—'tis grotesque
 To think of all the evil left behind
 By honest fools who act because they're blind.

Meanwhile the Fusiliers had been forgotten.
 Their Colonel saw his chances of promotion
 Break up and crumble like an apple rotten
 Or like a hulk left drifting on the ocean,
 Just what it was, a sea of misbegotten
 Commands derived from the conceited notion
 That British armies have but to appear
 To paralyse the enemy with fear.

This Colonel, thinking he'd been purposely
 Neglected and kept out of the despatches,
 And also thinking of his family—
 His sons' careers, his dreary daughters' matches—
 Resolved that his great regiment should be
 The grand repairer of his General's laches.
 At worst he could be shot, at least degraded,
 Or fame might do what never yet his pay did—

That is, defray expenses. So small thoughts
 Do breed gigantic deeds. The thought of dinner
 Has brought about the storm of mighty forts
 Till then impregnable. No saint nor sinner,
 No Cæsar with his legions and cohorts,
 No Cromwell, no Napoleon's a winner
 Without some simple thought dictating action,
 Which else is blurred with flurried mental faction.

Take all the muddle that is somehow straightened
 Sufficiently for peaceful life to go on,
 Though not perhaps to any very great end,
 And multiply it to the n th and so on
 To infinity, until you make the State end
 In looking like the famous Laoköon,
 And even then you'll not have such a tangle
 As grips an army that Red Tapers strangle.

Red tape is all the red the public sees
 When it is told another nation's plotting
 And bent on crushing all its liberties
 And ravishing its women-folk, and blotting
 Its ships and commerce from the seven seas,
 And burning down its houses and garrotting
 The householders, and generally looting—
 Such stories are employed to help recruiting.

And so I tell them now to pass the Censor,
 Who might suspect my innocent intention,
 Which is to make my poem a condenser
 Of things so true as to transcend invention.
 They'll be distilled and rarefied, and then, sir,
 The Civil List will groan beneath my pension,
 Accorded me for services to letters
 Accomplished in the teeth of all my betters.

Is not my pen the servant of the nation?
 It does its bit to advertise the ardour
 With which the British put a termination
 To folk who hit them hard by hitting harder.
 It sets down plainly for your admiration
 The feast that once adorned Great Britain's larder.
 Though now forgotten it is worth the trouble.
 Without soft soap no child can blow a bubble.

This long digression may be very boring,
 But so is war. What is it but digression?
 A way of waking nations up from snoring,
 Much as a writer breaks the dull procession
 Of facts and fads to keep the reader poring
 Until he ends the book in one short session.
 So wars are used to jog the nations jaded,
 And keep their energies from getting faded.

Good gracious! I've forgotten the affray
 In which I left my hero's father scrapping.
 That qualifies me for a general's pay
 And rank, the knack of indolently napping
 When I have sent whole regiments to slay.
 Muse, Muse, my dear, you've earned a sharpish slapping.
 You undertook this job, and here you let me
 Go riding off on fancies that beset me.

When Henry saw how he had been entrapped
 He cursed and swore and damned the British nation.
 He swore and said the Staff ought to be scrapped
 Or sent back home to ask the proclamation
 Of Peace, but not a proclamation wrapped
 In Foreign Office jargon: a cessation
 Of war as just a filthy bag of tricks
 Unworthy human life this side the Styx.

Yet how can man die better, said Horatius,
 Than facing fearful odds. Macaulay gave
 Himself the lie, and proved the lie fallacious,
 By dying quietly in bed, a grave
 And decent way of dying. But, good gracious!
 What does it matter which of these you have?
 Death is the end, with nothing to be said,
 But no one really wants to join the dead.

So why this most expensive apparatus
 For hastening the end of simple men ? . . .
 In Henry's thoughts there came a sharp hiatus
 As shells and bombs began to burst again,
 And ploughed the ranks as Roman Cincinnatus
 Once ploughed the land. And every now and then
 The ploughed-up ranks were sown with leaden seeds
 Which gave at once a crop of widows' weeds.

A baresark rage sprang up in Henry's soul,
 A rage against the British Cabinet,
 But, being out of reach, he spent his whole
 Blind rage upon the nearest he could get—
 That is, he made a certain rock his goal
 And urged his men to charge and know no let.
 The rock he marked took shape in Henry's madness
 As that sly Jew who'd lured him into badness.

The very stones of Africa, he shrieked,
 Are Jews, Jews, Jews, with little oily eyes,
 So old that all the sap of life has leaked
 For them away, and boredom they disguise
 By pulling off the schemes on which they've piqued
 Themselves, while helpless Gentiles rise
 In vain against them, Jews, Jews, everywhere,
 Extracting money from the very air.

There was no point in gaining that objective
 Except that Henry wished to have his fling.
 No man in danger's soberly reflective,
 And Henry could not think of anything
 Except of quickly finding some effective
 Manœuvre which with luck might safely bring
 The remnant of his cursing, sweating troops
 Out of the zone where they were slain in groups.

Himself was wounded in the arm and thighs,
 But he addressed his Tommies in the speech
 They understood and said: "You b——rs, rise
 To this God-damned occasion, up and teach
 The bloody, canting Boers that all the lies
 We British die for are beyond their reach.
 They're fighting for their country, we are fighting
 To help a whale to swallow down a whiting.

"So come on, boys, you blasted sons of bitches,
 We won't be slaughtered here like sheep, or let
 Our lives be chucked away to swell the riches
 Of any Jew or German baronet.
 I would I had him here, I'd have his breeches
 Debagged and burned, and then I'd damn well set
 Him standing with his hairy legs a-shaking
 On yonder rock to do his Empire-making."

The Tommies cheered and threw their kit away,
 And nothing kept but cartridges and rifles.
 They'd have, as Henry said, their fling that day
 Nor let themselves be held back by such trifles
 As shrapnel or barbed wire. They would SLAY.
 They felt the last ferocity that stifles
 All reason, justice, human comradeship.
 The blindest hatred had them in its grip.

They hacked their way clean through the Fusiliers,
 Who'd come up to support them at a trot.
 They hurled themselves with coarse, blaspheming cheers
 And never aimed or marked a single shot,
 But blazed at random. O! the poor, poor dears!
 Their drill, their training, all were clean forgot.
 Their charge became a furious stampede
 In which the fastest runner took the lead.

And no one knew at all what he was doing.
 The wounded knew they could not move and that
 Was all they knew. The rest were off pursuing
 The maddened troopers who were shooting at
 The sky, the earth, while some stood still boo-hooing,
 And others howled and flung their bodies flat,
 And hid their faces or lay dully gaping
 To see Death's hand a dead man's features shaping.

The baresark Henry hardly felt his hurt,
 But shouted hoarsely till he reached the rock
 Of Yiddish shape upon the famous spurt
 With which at school he used to beat the clock.
 The two men with him fell, and in the dirt
 Poured out their blood and quivered in the shock
 Of death. And others came and cursed and shouted.
 That they had won a victory none doubted.

And so they had. They saw a stir and bustle
 Among the enemy who could not know
 That such a frantic, fearless, frenzied tussle
 Was simply silly. It was time to go,
 They thought, and set about it with a hustle
 To render harmless the impending blow.
 The hard-up Colonel of the Fusiliers
 Pounced on his chance to save his sons' careers.

He rushed his men up (what was left of them),
 And by this time it had begun to dawn
 Upon the rest, whose customary phlegm
 Was nigh exhausted, that their right had drawn
 Most perilously tight the outer hem
 Of their defences, where a breach gan yawn
 Invitingly. They filled it fairly quickly
 What time their officers looked green and sickly.

For no one knew whence came the impetus
 That carried the heroic soldiers on,
 Like figures in some crazy calculus
 Manipulated by a crank who's gone
 A little mad. They moved impervious
 To shot and shell until the fight was won,
 And they were standing on a scrubby nek
 And saw the Boers inspanning for a trek.

They stood and watched the enemy preparing
 To fly, but no one told them what to do.
 The jeopardy they stood in was too glaring,
 But how to extricate them no one knew,
 And only Henry had the reckless daring
 For victories afresh and conquests new.
 And he, half dying, wished to have his fling
 Before he learned the angelic song to sing.

He rushed ahead with half-a-dozen men
 And one machine gun. Soon they were but three.
 These were supported by another ten
 Unable to resist the mad *mêlée*,
 And others followed, ten and ten again,
 All in a wild and maddened ecstasy,
 Who flung themselves upon the Boer position
 To find themselves at once *sans* ammunition.

This awful fate brought Henry to his senses,
 And when he looked and saw the mangled dead
 And then the enemy's untouched defences,
 His heart with most remorseful anguish bled.
 The mind in such an awful time condenses
 The thought of years, and Henry turned and said :
 "I've played the game, by God, I've played the game,
 And wasted life to glut a Jew with fame."

And as he spoke he saw that Cuddie Mason,
 His fag at school, was standing by his side,
 And Cuddie grinned and put a cheery face on
 The hell they shared—or rather, Cuddie tried,
 For he could only twist a grim grimace on
 His remnant of a face, which he had tied
 Together with his putties. “Cuddie! Cuddie!”
 Cried Henry, “this is absolutely bloody!”

For answer Cuddie spun round like a top,
 And gave a yell, a whistle and a croak,
 And toppled down and crumpled with a flop,
 And grinned as though this were another joke
 At his expense. He pleaded for a drop
 Of water or with thirst he'd surely choke.
 And Henry had a little flask of rum.
 “That's good,” said Cuddie, “that was good, by gum.”

No thought had Henry then but for his fag,
 The bright-eyed, scapegrace, brilliant young Etonian
 Whom it had been his duty to debag
 And thrash for cultivating a Neronian
 Indifference to duty and the drag—
 That is, he had not used the cream Meltonian
 Upon the jack-boots Henry used to wear
 To hunt the harmless whippet-haunted hare.

This twisted thing, this blood-bespattered shape,
 Was Cuddie, Cuddie of the piping voice
 And merry smile, who, grinning like an ape,
 Would come each morning with the dreary choice
 Of sausages or fish. And Cuddie in a scrape
 Would make the Matron's virgin heart rejoice,
 So guileless and so sweet was the expression
 With which his big blue eyes would cloud confession.

His eyes had now that babyish, bright gleam
 As though he wished his innocence to make
 Death's hand a little lighter, that his dream
 Of childish glee might never have to wake
 Upon a world where things are what they seem.
 And Henry's whole desire was now to take
 This battered piece of childhood in his arms
 And rescue it from filthy war's alarms.

He thought of Noel, Noel come to this,
 The loveliness of boyhood ground to dust.
 And Henry felt his son's dear baby kiss
 Upon his cheek, and vowed that Noel must
 Be given every chance, and never miss
 So fatally the love of life in lust
 For gain or women or the gambler's pleasure
 In dicing with the gods for ease and leisure.

Though weak himself, he shouldered senseless Cuddie
 And staggered back towards the British lines.
 The sunset sky was amethyst and ruddy
 With orange tints, like grapes on autumn vines.
 And Henry had a vision of his study,
 With books, cigars and slyly smuggled wines
 Laid out by Cuddie for an evening's orgy
 With Wyndham-Davies, known as Georgy-Porgy.

And Wyndham-Davies in the end was sacked
 Because of Cuddie, for the same old reason
 For which the walls of Ilium were attacked
 And Sodom and Gomorrah for a season
 Incurred the fury of the Lord, who lacked
 The kindly knowledge of the world which, please, on
 Behalf of Wyndham-Davies I invoke.
 For being sacked from Eton is no joke.

O Cuddie, Cuddie, you were Eton's Helen.
 For you the world to England is all Troy.
 For you the world is sliced up like a melon,
 A feast for England's darling Eton boy.
 For you Great Britain's turned into a felon
 To steal the earth to make her darling's toy.
 O Cuddie, Cuddie, black is the disaster
 That smashes you, the earth's great mistress-master.

So Henry, sobbing underneath his load,
 Half dead, half blinded, almost wholly crazy,
 Came crawling back upon the sandy road
 By which he'd rushed in his ecstatic, hazy
 Determination not to bear the goad
 He vaguely felt had pushed him from his lazy
 But profitable life among the Jews,
 With whom to deal is "Heads or tails you lose."

From British throats came rousing cheer on cheer
 As Henry's deed was slowly realised.
 With Cuddie dead, as, dying, he drew near
 He saw their folly clear and undisguised.
 It angered him their foolish shouts to hear,
 Well knowing how his thoughts would have surprised
 And shocked each manly patriotic shouter,
 Had they but known him as he was—a doubter.

He staggered in and laid poor Cuddie down,
 And scrawled upon a paper with his blood,
 "My boy—for England!" Knitted in a frown
 Of pain his brows were, as in sudden flood
 His life ebbed out, not knowing the renown
 In which it ended. Tottering he stood
 In agony to find death intervening—
 "For England not for Empire" was his meaning.

And soon he died with Cuddie in his arms
 And curses on his lips for millionaires
 With Jewish names, who with no other charms
 Than money can so complicate affairs
 And make great nations nothing but their farms
 Which they lease out, and when they need repairs
 They let them go to ruin to avoid
 The risk of trouble with the unemployed.

There must be heroes or a war's so dull
 That nobody could stand it for a week.
 'Tis far too like Death's horrid, grinning skull,
 Which through the Press has got the power to speak,
 And lest its words should seem but void and null,
 A hero's voice must ape the accents meek
 Of Jesus Christ, and say that greater love
 Hath no man than—has been displayed above.

Now all the fame amassed by Higgins, J.,
 L.J., M.R., in the vicinity
 Of Temple Bar was naught to what that day
 Was earned by Higgins soon to be V.C.,
 Which seems to show that Folly has its way,
 Though Wisdom through the ages tries to be
 A ruling principle. Can Wisdom rule
 When Man, all said and done, is such a fool?

Sir Somerset Mulready Higgins thought
 It could not, for, although he was the famous
 And learned Editor of the Report
 Of Privy Council cases, with Mandamus
 The key-word of his mind, which made the Tort
 As clear as day for every ignoramus,
 Although he was Right Hon., P.C., K.C.,
 No Harmsworth was more bellicose than he.

Sir Somerset on both sides the Atlantic
 Was famous, and his evening shirt front shone
 (As never did his wits, which were pedantic)
 With ribbon, star and gold medallion,
 Enough to drive a snob with envy frantic.
 In early life he'd been a learned Don,
 And every kind of University
 Had given him an Hon. Litt. Hum. degree.

He had more letters to his name than even
 Lord Avebury had on his title-page,
 More famous friendships than Sir Leslie Stephen,
 More honour as a literary sage
 Than Carlyle at his worst, yet he was driven
 To share the popular and frantic rage.
 "My boy—for England!" What a lovely headline
 For those who see the Army as the red line

That goes on to the crack o' doom. Of course
 It was too good for Harmsworth to resist.
 That gentleman was harnessing his horse
The Daily Mail to War which brought the grist
 Into his mill in Fleet Street with a force
 Impossible through any dodge or twist
 In peace time, and with Winston Churchill's vulture
 He pounced on poor old England's dying culture.

"My boy—for England!" Noel's fate was sealed.
 Sir Somerset forgave the hero's crimes
 As youthful follies when the war revealed
 The saintly soul with Alfred Harmsworth's limes
 Upon the centre of the stage. To yield
 The wrath of years unto the *Mail* and *Times*
 Gave old Sir Somerset more pleasant unction
 Than even to attend a royal function.

To widowed Ellen cables came in shoals,
 Her very parson-husband wrote to her
 And said he found his single cure of souls
 Had filled his life, and he could minister
 More proudly to his flock that on the scrolls
 Of Fame and Heaven and Harmsworth such a stir
 Was made by Higgins, whom he'd always known
 To be the kind of Man who Stands Alone.

And Ellen found Great Britain very grateful
 For the excitement Henry had provided.
 Where she was starved before she found her plate full.
 Her daily letters left her undecided.
 She found the thought of England very hateful.
 Her feelings and her hopeful thoughts collided.
 She wished to do the best thing for her son,
 And she was half inclined to cut and run.

The House of Commons voted her a pension,
 And she received the offer of a suite
 Of rooms at Hampton Court, which, let us mention
 It *sotto voce*, she declined to meet.
 At last she asked her son for his intention,
 And he replied that life was bitter-sweet
 Since he had news that Katje's home was burned
 And she in concentration camp interned.

And by some youthful instinct Noel knew
 The thought that held his father's fading mind.
 He also knew that he had work to do—
 A work for which his nature him inclined.
 What work it was that Time and Life must brew.
 And he resolved that Time and Life should find
 Him ready when they needed him to make
 His effort for his soul's and England's sake.

Sir Somerset now clamoured for his heir
 And for the widow. So these two set sail,
 Relieved to leave the heavy, brooding air
 That made South Africa a sultry jail,
 With Rhodes and Milner, that blood-guilty pair,
 Still pouring blood to please *The Daily Mail*
 And certain Jews who gathered up the spoils
 Now they had got Great Britain in their toils.

The *Kinfauns Castle* steamed from Table Bay
 While fifty thousand horse and foot were landed
 To back the first, in turn to melt away
 And call for fifty thousand more demanded
 By R. Kipling, while the widows pay, pay, pay,
 And dazed and wounded heroes are left stranded.
 But Noel left to find an education
 Laid at his feet by a thrice-grateful nation.

There in these brightly, lightly written stanzas
 You have the first instalment of a serial.
 None of your *Daily Mail* extravaganzas,
 But facts redeemed by poesy ethereal.
 Don Quixote's fancy tweaks the Sancho Panzas
 Who built up England Liberal-Imperial,
 And made a Comic Opera of London
 By always doing what they should have undone.

Dear Reader, Fame and Love and Beauty come
 A-knocking at your door like canvassers
 To bid you help in making London hum
 With all the Fantasy that lately stirs,
 Since there's been nothing but the dreary drum
 And blatant bugle which have not drowned hers,
 But rather made her rouse her faery forces
 To steer old England on her ancient courses.

That is towards the high imagined goal
Beyond the rainbow, where true Liberty
Her dwelling has, and welcomes every soul
Who finds his way there through the ecstasy
That lies within the over-brimming bowl
Of life for those whose will is to be free.
Ours is the will. Desire we meet in God,
Whose wisdom breaks the measured silver rod.

Go forth, my poem : for, though no one like you,
There shall be ten of you before I've done.
And though my humour, Reader, may not strike you
As very funny, yet I'll have my fun.
When Noel fails, then I shall take up my cue,
And let my pent-up thoughts and feelings run.
For in an epic there's no need to grovel
To rules one must consider in a novel.



CANTO TWO



CANTO II

TAKE, Poet, take thy pen, and thou, O Muse,
Dictate thy fancy whatsoe'er it light on.
If 'tis thy will, like Zola, to accuse,
Then shall thy Poet don the tragic chiton.
Wilt thou his guileless fancy disabuse?
Then take him for a week-end down to Brighton,
To drown his faith in cynical salt laughter
And show him what humanity is after.

The Muse, an early love of mine, took me
Aside and asked for four and sevenpence,
The fare to Cambridge, where she wished to see
My hero gain his first experience
Of English life by taking his degree
In Law and meeting the intelligence
That practises philosophy beside
The Cam. 'Tis Tabland's chiefest pride.

"My boy—for England!" Harmsworth's mighty trumpet
Blew several blasts when Noel donned his gown.
Reporters held the tub for him to thump it,
But Noel most politely turned them down,
And they had very ruefully to lump it
When he refused to add to his renown
By saying what he thought of England, or
Exactly what he'd come to England for.

“ Young Higgins silent as to his impressions.”
 He could not tell them he was simply dazed,
 With people in bewildering processions
 Through all his thoughts meandering. Amazed
 He was, disgruntled, bruised by the obsessions
 That London in his youthful mind had raised.
 So many people, huddled, dull and busy,
 Made Noel reel and all his senses dizzy.

Cambridge to him was a sublime retreat.
 Here youth was gay and old men were aslumber.
 Life was not trampled under countless feet,
 Nor was the soul half stifled by mere number.
 The English men and women in the street
 Impressed him chiefly as just so much lumber
 So few there were who walked with any aim,
 So many listless, bored, disgusted, tame.

Let's say at once that Higgins of the Hall,
 A member of the Pitt, the Athenæum,
 The A.D.C., and practically all
 The clubs that make a young man sing *Te Deum*
 To think he has escaped the dread black ball,
 Although in fact he'll nearly always flee 'em—
 Let's say at once that Higgins of the Hall
 Had Fortune, Fame and even Fate in thrall.

Not often does a poet have the luck
 To have his Muse enamoured of his hero,
 But when he does he knows he can't be stuck
 For inspiration somewhere down by Zero,
 And he can play the *raisonneur* and tuck
 Them up, as in the dramas of Pinero
 The kindly bore with verbiage distracts
 Attention from the dislocated facts.

Noel has been two happy years in *statu*
Pupillari, two years of careless growth.
 O Cambridge! when I turn and look back at you
 I feel inclined to take my Bible oath
 (Although agnostically minded) that you
 Instructed me in little but the sloth
 Becoming to a gentleman. However,
 To sing your praises here's my best endeavour.

O Cambridge! Learning's town where adolescence
 Is sent to be subdued and educated
 And toned down from the heady effervescence
 With which the young are parlously inflated,
 Thy mists exude a powerful putrescence
 Which I have always passionately hated.
 For though it cures a youth's swell-headedness,
 It turns his H_2O to H_2S .

Dear Cambridge! It is not alone thy climate
 That dries the marrow in a young man's bones,
 For not alone the thieving birds of Time ate
 Thy plums of learning and left bare the stones,
 But at the roots of learning's tree the lime ate,
 The quick-lime which, when Brown and Smith and Jones
 Asserted their industrial plutocracy,
 Destroyed the very thought of aristocracy.

A university is like a river
 Which from its source goes winding to the sea,
 But it may be more like a sluggish liver—
 For instance, Cambridge could not digest me.
 The thought of it still makes me sink and shiver,
 The waste of time and brains and L.S.D.—
 However, that is neither here nor there,
 Both I and Cambridge are the worse for wear.

A university should be a stream of mind
 Fresh watered from a country's healthy youth
 Which passes on the sea of life to find,
 Depositing its well-washed grains of truth
 Like gold. In my day mud was left behind.
 The only gold I knew there crowned the tooth,
 The canine, of a learned, famous bore,
 Whose lectures were a long protracted snore.

O! but the goodly stream of youth that flows
 Along the ditch called Cambridge year by year,
 The pretty tender murmur as it goes,
 The softest echo of the musick'd sphere,
 Rising and falling as it sweetly throws
 The song of Heaven to a mortal ear.
 But Donnish ears are much too long and hairy
 To hear the music of the realms of faery.

The very gargoyles on the antique walls
 Are more alive to youth's enchanted glee,
 As year by year it surges up and calls
 To age to break its frozen fantasy.
 I know a gargoyle who at college balls
 Has slithered down and winked and whispered me:
 "Young lover, you have naught to do with these
 Who offer you the vice of Socrates."

I wept to see the ancient seat of learning
 That nurtured Marlowe, Milton, Jonson, Gray,
 Erasmus, Newton and Sam Butler turning
 Into a place where none remains to pray
 Who comes to scoff, but leaves it with a burning
 Desire to see the whole thing swept away
 Before it goes entirely to the devil
 And sinks to Manchester's or Oxford's level.

Enough of this, for Noel had no notion
 That Cambridge was not what she still appeared,
 An alma mater whose maternal motion
 Was all to see her sons to manhood reared,
 To teach each boy a chivalrous devotion,
 What time he watched his swiftly growing beard,
 And had a few years' healthy breathing-space
 Before Dame Fortune called him to his place.

Cambridge has beauty. Go you to St Ives
 And walk by road until you top the hill
 Where Girton keeps her busy humming hives
 Of girls. There stop and gaze and take your fill
 Of King's, whose chapel rears aloft and drives
 Its pinnacles to heaven o'er the still
 Untainted comfort of the ancient town
 That, save for King's, in grey mists seems to drown.

Then drop down quickly to the Backs where trees
 Make noble avenues and leafy screens
 And curtains drawn delighted eyes to tease
 With glimpses of the trim and turfy greens,
 The Epicurus' gardens made to please
 The scholar's senses, not by any means
 So dim and dull as those pretend who think
 The scholar's mind is clouded by his ink.

For other beauties see John Willis Clark,
 Whose guide to Cambridge costs the humble shilling.
 The time has come for Noel to embark
 Upon adventure, though he's most unwilling
 To take the plunge, suspecting me of dark
 Designs upon his happiness in killing
 His all-too-fleeting time before he goes down
 And to the grindstone has to keep his nose down.

Young men there are like Etherington Smith
 Or Rupert Brooke whose quality of grace
 Can make them, as they walk and talk, a myth
 To whom the humbler race of men gives place,
 And like the heroines of Meredith
 They seem to spring from some forgotten race,
 Or possibly they're sent by the unborn
 To make our hopes of mankind less forlorn.

If I were Homer I'd begin my tale
 With mighty line describing how young men
 In eight-oared ships stir up the water stale
 And almost stagnant of an English fen,
 Year in, year out, in snow and rain and hail,
 Their two miles out and two miles back again,
 Their oars and sliding-seats together ringing,
 Strong arms and stalwart bodies nobly swinging.

Not being Homer I must rest content
 To sing the navigation of the Cam,
 Where I have seen a sudden beauty lent
 To ugliness to shine through all the sham
 Of Cambridge, when the light blue oarsmen sent
 Their cedar ship, with such a lordly slam
 As leaves all common craft awash behind,
 A-skimming up from Grassy to the Grind.

"O Troïka, my bird Troïka!" sang the Russian,
 M. Gogol, in his epic narrative,
Dead Souls. "Kanonen," sings the martial Prussian
 For all the racial symbol he can give,
 But I will take the eight-oared ship and gush on
 To show the dream for which the English live.
 O swan, O bird, O octave, O divine,
 No symbol's grace can ever equal thine.

I cannot tell the nothings that make up
 The charm of Cambridge ; books and games and talk,
 The hot discussions and the frothing cup
 Of second-hand ideas, confusing chalk
 With cheese ; the squeaking of a bumptious pup
 Who thinks he barks, or ever he can walk
 Attempts to run, and gobbles up at sight
 Whatever filth may tempt his appetite.

Gargantua ! O Rabelais, O Swift,
 Support me when I say the human belly
 Commands most human worship to uplift
 The race and save it from th'amorphous jelly
 To which without religion it must drift.
 "Perfectible is Man," said Percy Shelley,
 Who, quite unlike most poets, was unable
 To share the true religion of the table.

At Cambridge young men learn to eat and drink.
 I've seen Bill Pens or Stephen Gassler guzzle
 Enough to keep a household from the brink
 Of poverty. I've pondered long the puzzle
 How one can eat so much and never think
 That two or three are starving and can muzzle
 The wolf no more. But Stomach is our lord.
 We all eat more than we can well afford.

Now when my most capricious Muse and I
 Went down to Cambridge, Noel's twenty-first
 Birthday was honoured very happily
 In ample satisfaction of the thirst
 And hunger of the young fraternity
 Of sportsmen who his friendship gently nursed
 To be included in the invitations
 To share what should be liberal libations.

A cantalupe, hors d'œuvre, with Haut Sauterne,
 Soup thick and clear, red mullet, salmon trout,
 An aspic, curried eggs and cutlets turn
 The normal spaces of the appetite well out
 And open new capacities to learn
 The power to face the solemn final bout
 Of eating called for by the lordly spread
 Sent by the Pitt at two-pound-ten a head.

Roast mutton elegantly christened Pré
 Salé, then sorbet and a cigarette :
 Liqueurs to wash the memory away
 Of what had been and light up what was yet
 To come, as faisan rôti, jambon d'York soufflé,
 Pêches Melba, petits-fours, an omelette
 Surprise, a bombe, brown bread and caviare
 Before dessert, madeira and cigar.

The forty finest eaters of their time
 Did ample justice to this noble spread ;
 They ate and drank until they felt sublime ;
 They drank and ate until upon its head
 The world was standing and it seemed a crime
 To give the smallest whispered hint of bed.
 Then after speeches all the party bawled
 And those who would not sing were badly mauled.

The Proctor sent a Bulldog in to say
 He'd be obliged if Mr Higgins' party
 Were somewhat less vociferously gay.
 The Bulldog was received with very hearty
 Applause and made to join the bawdy play
 Then going forward. He was dubbed Astarte,
 Upon a chair enthroned and wreathed with ribbons
 And worshipped with the rites described in Gibbon's

Decline and Fall and other works historic
 By scholars rather bored with Christianity,
 Who find it tepid after the caloric
 Of ages warmed with heathenish profanity.
 The Bulldog took the Forty's categoric
 Imperative with excellent urbanity.
 He also took the money pressed into
 His hand and did the thing it bade him do.

That is, he held his peace, although his hat
 Could not conceal the vine leaves in his hair.
 He joined the Proctor and informed him that
 The party was adjourning to repair
 To college (Hic !). That hiccup put the fat
 Into the fire. The Proctor's icy stare
 Alarmed the Bulldog into blurting out
 He'd let them treat him to a drop of—stout.

So Noel's name was written on the scroll
 Of that night's infamy, along with Scott
 Of Sidney, Jones of John's and Cattermole
 Of Cats, and others of a rowdy lot
 Who thought the gentlemanly rôle
 Was best upheld on rum or whisky hot
 Imbined with painted ladies of the night—
 In short, they thought it manly to get tight.

"For Auld Lang Syne" the well-fed forty sang,
 Their strong hands gripped to make a friendly chain,
 And through the sleeping town their voices rang
 And seemed to call to life but called in vain.
 O! Youth is like a bubble blown to hang
 Upon the air and take the rainbow stain
 Of life upon its clearness, then to vanish
 Like all the wonders men and women banish.

Noel regained his rooms on Staircase X,
 A drunker and a wiser man, and lay
 And thought the thoughts most common to his sex
 Upon whom Love has cast his golden ray.
 It never was his habit to perplex
 His wits with things his tongue refused to say.
 He thought of Katje and her giant brothers
 And then he thought with pain of certain others.

Sweet is the night air from the scented limes,
 Most sweet the moonlight in the river's mirror
 As Noel out of college swiftly climbs
 By crannies known too well for any error,
 And sweet to hear old Great St Mary's chimes
 And startled birds half waked with tirra-lirra.
 And sweet it is to thread the avenues
 With all to gain and much perhaps to lose.

So Noel felt, and so his blithe heart sang,
 His senses sobered by the keen night air
 That smelled of clover with the bitter tang
 Of herbs to make his soul alert, aware
 Of unknown life that all the Sturm und Drang
 Of youth concealed. It must be always thus,
 Thought he, the throbbing, thrilling mystery
 That permeates the earth, including ME.

Soon he was out beneath the hanging dome
 Of night upon Coe Fen, whose willows stand
 Like gnarled old men left muttering at home
 While youth and courage go forth hand in hand
 And through the world adventurously roam,
 All faith, all hope, its danger to withstand.
 Like old men were the willows menacing
 The faith and hope and beauty young men bring.

Willows aslant the brookish Cam and over
 The ditches of the water-meadows make
 Sad company for our young ardent lover
 Who ran his swift desire to overtake
 And heeded not the waterfowl and plover
 Who started up from sedgy nest and brake
 And whirled aloft and sank again to rest
 As the intruder passed each precious nest.

Another nest he dreamed, another bird
 Snug in her nest within the pretty cage
 That she was trapped in, bolted with a word.
 For words upon the brief, fantastic stage
 Of human life are, though it seems absurd,
 The sov'reign power against which mortal rage
 May dash itself in vain. There's no appeal.
 For words usurp the power they should reveal.

Now runs he through the wet unfathomed grass
 Where frogs and toads piped protest as he went;
 And now and then his breath could hardly pass
 His lips, so eager was his young intent
 To close with splendour, like young Fortinbras,
 The tragedy in which her life was spent.
 That night would be a tragedy without her.
 He was too young and innocent to doubt her.

Her garden gate was locked, but well he knew
 The friendly, lowly branching sycamore
 That wholly hid the house from outside view.
 And then it was an easy task to bore
 His way through shrubs that showered down their dew,
 And then to ope the kitchen garden door,
 To reach the pent-house and from thence the skylight
 Which servants latched and she unlatched at twilight.

She had a husband, elderly and quite
 Indifferent to what she had to give
 In tenderness and love. He thought it right,
 Because she bored him, he and she should live
 A wedded couple in the public sight,
 Though wedded life to love was but a sieve
 With meshes made to hold a mild affection
 With all else finer left for his rejection.

The eager midnight hours he thought were best
 For work, or if not work then healthy sleep.
 She could not but obey his cool behest
 Although at first it took her months to weep
 Her disappointment out. But she was blest
 With happy spirits rooted very deep
 In her rich nature, and he could not kill
 Her passionate and thwarted woman's will.

A thwarted woman. I regret to say
 This intrigue was begun within the holy
 Precincts of Mother Church. Perhaps it may
 Be some excuse to say it grew up slowly,
 For her intent at first was all to pray
 And his to feel the music's melancholy.
 Not once or twice has King's historic chapel
 Helped on the trouble started with an apple.

This was in King's, where everything is done
 To soothe the troubled heart and make it clear
 That Beauty ends where Life has but begun,
 And that the human mind is grand, austere,
 A noble eagle gazing at the sun
 And never flinching, never showing fear
 Before the blinding wonder of the awe
 That holds all things within its mighty law.

An organ's music and a singing boy,
 The hanging spider-tracing of the roof,
 The branching columns and the coloured joy
 Of Flemish windows and the oeil-de-bœuf,
 The prism'd light, such beauties should employ
 The spirit, and bid passions stand aloof.
 And yet a spirit kindled in a church
 Won't always leave its body in the lurch.

I know that Noel's lady was sincere,
 And loved religion more the more she sinned,
 Found deeper comfort in it than the mere
 Attachment to a label she had pinned
 Upon her soul when it was young and clear
 And virgin, and unable to rescind
 Or to confirm a word of her belief
 Till it had stood the test of joy and grief.

Marconi! Thou wert long ago forestalled,
 How long I cannot say, but long ago,
 Perhaps when man in primal forests crawled,
 Perhaps—but honestly I do not know.
 When first I thought of this I was appalled,
 And so will you be as my verses show
 How woman through the ages has been tireless,
 In sedulous improvement of her Wireless.

Her S.O.S., her signal of distress,
 Is sent out on some all-pervading wave
 Of ether, though I can't pretend to guess
 Exactly how she manages to save
 Appearances the while, or to possess
 Her vivid secret closely as the grave.
 For so she does, as everyone must know,
 Who ever watched the human puppet-show.

In self-defence a woman is a liar.
 Untruthfulness lies in her limpid eyes.
 Her soul is coloured, like Will Shakespeare's dyer,
 With what it's dipped in, which is mostly lies.
 Because of this I don't, like Jeremiah,
 Give tongue and prophesy a world's demise.
 I just accept the disconcerting fact,
 And state it with my customary tact.

The reason is, I think, that if the fury
 That lives in woman's veins were fully let out,
 'Twould mean too oft a case for judge and jury,
 A horrid scandal in the papers set out.
 In every woman there's a lurking houri
 Who tears and struggles like a cat to get out.
 And when this cat has marked her destined prey
 (See Bernard Shaw) he cannot get away.

There have been famous virgins, Joan of Arc,
 (But she died young), and Florence Nightingale
 And Queen Elizabeth—a question mark
 Against *her* name—and there's the tale
 Of Santa Caterina who lay stark
 Upon a board, and still refused to fail
 Her chastity which she had put a price on,
 Accounting it her Kyrie Eleison.

Well! Other women other tastes, and when
 A woman's married there's an end to *that*.
 No longer can she think the world of men
 Perdition to her soul. She's belled the cat
 And learned much more from pussy than my pen
 Can delicately write without the gnat
 Which stung to death the work of D. H. Lawrence
 Exposing mine to general abhorrence.

This dissertation on the female lot
 Brings us at last to the inamorata
 Of Noel Higgins and the meagre plot
 Of this my almost Shandean cantata.
 To sing her praises words of mine are not
 Enough. They need a Richard Strauss sonata,
 Lasciviously falling on the ear,
 Or excerpts from the *Rosencavalier*.

And so to bed, as that old gossip Pepys,
 The rogue, concluded many entries in
 His diary. Now Noel softly creeps
 His way towards the partner of his sin.
 At every step his young heart bounds and leaps,
 For every step evokes a fearful din
 That seems to sound and echo through the house,
 Yet no one hears it but a vagrom mouse.

Pa-patter-pat, the third door from the staircase.
 The well-oiled lock lets in the honey-thief.
 O righteous you who never were in their case,
 And in your book of life turned every leaf
 Unspotted, you may take this as a fair case
 Of that on which you waste your pious grief.
 If Love is given, how can it be stolen?
Was man geniesst das wird man wiederholen.

A young man marked down by a female rake
 Is marked for life. Still Life's a thing of sears
 And wounds, and it is better far to take
 Some hurt in fighting than in prison bars
 To bind the soul, there leaving it to ache
 And pine and hunger grimly for the stars
 That give so little light to souls half blinded
 With trying to oblige the narrow-minded.

The door with well-oiled lock has shut us out
 And Noel from our gaze has been withdrawn.
 So we have time for philosophic doubt
 Of modern morals as we pace the lawn
 And wait until the noisy stirabout
 Of birds announces morning at the dawn.
 O! happy birds for whom the day goes by
 Each moment telling of eternity.

Most melancholy light of dawning day,
 Most dismal din of crowing chanticleer,
 Another mystic night has passed away
 And still the same old universe is here.
 The same old sky, lit in the same old way
 To put a polish on the old veneer
 Of beauty which occasional illusion
 Makes credible amid the world's confusion.

While Noel and the blackbird sang the same,
 He on the wall, the bird upon a quince,
 Both singing Love that naught should ever tame,
 The boy's eyes saw a sight that made him wince ;
 For standing by a large cucumber-frame
 He saw his tutor, Mr Mackworth-Prince,
 Who lived next door the house of love (or sin,
 As you prefer), look upward with a grin.

Now there are grins and grins, and this grin gave
 A kind of cruel triumph to the lip,
 And Noel felt as though the yawning grave
 Of moral judgment had him in its grip.
 He knew his tutor for a canting knave
 Who loved with pious finger-tips to dip
 In scandal, and the dirtier the better,
 That he might crush the spirit with the letter.

Now for the first time Noel felt unclean,
 For from the world that late had seemed so fair
 Poured in the fluid of the great latrine
 Through which inhuman humans throw off their
 Excreted thoughts of what they might have been
 Had they not failed of courage when 'twas Dare
 Or Perish, and been eaten up with rust,
 The thick deposit of life-long disgust.

He leaped down from the sycamore and ran
 As hard as he could pelt across the fields,
 To leave behind his vision of that man
 Whose grin revealed the power that England wields,
 Poor England, ridden with the Puritan.
 And Noel hated England then who yields
 Her joyous spirits to the blasphemous
 And sickly minded unadventurous.

He scarcely knew which way he ran, but soon
 Was hard by Grantchester, and knew the trees
 That grow by Byron's Pool. The merry tune
 Of water by the weir began unfreeze
 The chill upon his soul that craved the boon
 Of utter nakedness to win the ease
 Of body's answer to the fragrant wind
 Sweet from the reeds along the river lined.

And now young Noel on the dewy grass
 Dances and tramples buttercups and daisies,
 And sheds the *vanitatum vanitas*
 That late had choked him when he sang love's praises,
 And all the hurts that bruised his spirit pass,
 For now another song his spirit raises.
 See the white body shine and gleam and shimmer
 As greenish waters part before the swimmer.

Then out he comes and rides about the mead
 Upon an ancient horse come up to spy
 What sprite is here to interrupt his feed
 At such an hour when no one passes by.
 And lo! the pack-horse turned into a steed,
 A Pegasus that knows not how to fly.
 And larks go soaring from their hidden nests
 And pour the song for Noel from their breasts.

The Psalmist has a truthful word or two
 To sing of water, but he nowhere sings
 Of diving. That is left for me to do.
 But here so fast enthusiasm swings
 Me on that words can't possibly be true.
 I laugh within to see how Noel springs,
 Then stiffens, soars a moment, dips
 And smoothly through th'untroubled water slips.

To Noel Love was such an element
 As water, for refreshment and for healing.
 When in the world of men too closely pent
 Then he could dive into the stream of feeling
 That from the world of women God has sent,
 The meaning of the universe revealing
 Sufficiently for any honest mortal
 To understand and love it all and chortle.

Yet Noel was in bed and sound asleep
 What time his tactful gyp came softly knocking
 To find out whether he had better keep
 The breakfast on the table for—O shocking!—
 The shades of evening had begun to creep
 Towards the East before the interlocking
 Half-dreams, half-thoughts that held my hero bound
 Were broken by a bell's insistent sound

What! Chapel time! And what! The day is gone!
 'Tis true. The sun shines wanly over Trinity
 And strikes the river opal, and upon
 The ancient scene sheds evening's new divinity,
 Which never has such high dominion
 As in the Cambridge Backs and their vicinity.
 At least that's my impression, though it's true
 Some other place may be the same to you.

Then Noel rose and bathed and dressed to find
 He had just time to honour the request
 Of Mr Mackworth Prince, who'd underlined
 The printed card conveying his behest
 That he should come before the college dined
 One hour with punctuality—*id est*,
 At six o'clock. And six o'clock had struck
 When Noel sallied forth to try his luck.

He found his tutor squinting down his nose.
 The interview was short but to the point.
 'Twas sad that Mr Higgins was of those
 Whose conduct put good morals out of joint.
 The clergyman stood up and on his toes
 Swung to and fro and seemed to say: "Aroint
 Thee, witch, aroint thee. *Vade Sathanas.*
Te excommunicabo Vanitas."

No word was said of Noel's escapade,
 But he was damned and told the college had
 Determined an example should be made
 To stop the college going to the bad,
 As it would surely do if Justice stayed
 Her hand. The tutor said it was his sad
 And painful duty—here he shed a tear—
 To terminate a promising career.

The tutor grinned and icy triumph flitted
 Across his lips, but Noel's pride refused
 To answer and no single word permitted
 To pass his lips. Yet soon he was amused
 To see how close his torturer had knitted
 The spider-threads of cunning he had used,
 And how that morning's knowledge shot and glinted
 Behind his eyes, though it was never hinted.

Straight from the tutor to the lady flew
 Our Noel with the tidings of his woe,
 To ask her what she now proposed to do,
 And whether she could nerve herself to go
 With him to London, there to find a new
 Existence. But the lady answered No.
 She wept and said she would not spoil his life
 By giving him so elderly a wife.

Her frankness made him see the brutal truth
 That she was nearly twice as old as he.
 He could not bear her present mood of ruth,
 For he was ruthless in his wish to see
 Her find in him some stronger thing than youth.
 But youth had been the lady's ecstasy,
 And when 'twas taken from her she was old enough
 To know 'twould come again if she were bold enough.

The drapers' shops were ravished of their crêpe,
 And half the town was hung with ribbons black,
 And wreaths of every sort and size and shape
 On Noel's staircase made a goodly stack.
 The hansom cabs wore streamers of black tape,
 And twenty Hallmen, each dressed in a sack,
 With ashes on his head, went through the town
 And wailed the news that Higgins was sent down.

A hearse was stolen from a stable-yard
 And led before an endless line of old
 Four-wheelers, and on each was hung a card
 Black-edged whereon the tale of woe was told,
 And some displayed to view a broken shard
 In token of the grief no heart could hold.
 "Not lost but gone before" and also "Mizpah"
 Were written large with these sad lines from *Rizpah*:

"My Noel will rise up whole when the trumpet
 Of judgment'll sound." And there was a band
 Which, shying at a tricky bar, would jump it
 Nor ever dream the tune was out of hand.
 If anyone disliked it let him lump it.
 They meant to make the whole town understand
 By means of *Saul* and Chopin interlarded
 Exactly how its loss should be regarded.

The "corpse" was put feet foremost in the train
 While on the platform—which is said to be
 The longest in the country—wept again
 The mourners with a wail that a banshee
 With no amount of practice could attain,
 Not even in the plaintive minor key
 Affected by the Irish School who strive
 To keep the ghost of poetry alive.

In London Noel had a *mauvais quart d'heure*
 With old Sir Somerset, who said he could not
 Hold up his head again. It hit him harder
 (He said) than any blow he'd had. He would not
 Expose the contents of his moral larder
 Till Noel told him what perhaps he should not
 Have done about the lady, when his uncle
 Went redder in the face than a carbuncle.

The tale was simply told as one man tells
 Another when he does not wish to lose
 A friendship. Noel opened up the cells
 Of all his heart. The old man could not choose
 But take its honey, though a thousand knells
 Of warning prejudice bade him refuse.
 He growled: "You should be careful what you do, man.
 What folly made you listen to the woman?"

"A woman of a certain age," he mumbled,
 "Is like a sponge, and boyish love is water,
 To be mopped up, etcetera." He grumbled,
 And growled, and spluttered, and as his breath grew
 shorter
 His wrathfulness within his entrails rumbled
 Until he frothed up like a glass of porter,
 And then he wrote the Don a stinging letter
 Which did no good but made him feel much better.

So Noel stayed in London and began
 To read in Chambers with a sparkish Lord,
 An Honourable and an Indian
 Come with what wealth his people could afford
 To learn to be a brown-faced Englishman,
 The very thing his people most abhorred.
 For East is East and Easterners detest
 Their culture being tainted by the West.

London was still the rather prim old city
 Described by William Makepeace Thackeray,
 Who spent his life in being rather witty
 At other folk's expense and made them pay
 Him for it. Though his mind was somewhat gritty,
 His style was smooth and ambled on its way
 Just like the comfortable bourgeois life
 Which satisfied John Bull if not his wife.

Those were the days when trade and *laissez-faire*
 Had come out top and forced their way into
 Society and bought the right to share
 The Season with the blue-blood people who
 Could not afford to scorn a millionaire
 Or to despise the plutocratic Jew,
 But kept the inmost secrets of their jobbery
 To dish the bourgeois upstarts through their snobbery.

And the result is London. O sweet Thames,
 Run softly till I end my song! O Lea,
 O Serpentine, whom civic art condemns
 To be a lake when Nature bade thee be
 A babbling stream, and O ye several gems
 That decorate the parks, come sing with me
 The praises of the city overblown
 With monstrous growths of stucco, brick and stone.

O bourgeois London, trusting to the mist
 To give thee beauty, even as the minds
 Of these thy children trust the fogs to twist
 Their thoughts to fit the narrow code that binds
 Their actions, so that, doing as they list,
 They may appear to do as Grundy finds
 Advisable for people of repute
 Who must *seem* moral and yet *be* astute.

O London, if I had the eloquence
 Of Bottomley and Shaw and R. J. Campbell
 Rolled into one and the intelligence
 Of Wells and Bennett, or if I could ramble
 Like Chesterton, defying common-sense
 With paradox as prickly as a bramble,
 I might then reach the necessary height
 To sing thee—but 'tis doubtful if I might.

O London! Thou wert homely, thou wert still
 The paradise of snobs until the night
 That I am coming to, when I can kill
 My vain desire to soar up to the height
 That Spenser reached so lightly with his quill.
 My Almost vainly waits upon my Quite.
 My London, whose prevailing scent was dung
 Instead of petrol, must remain unsung.

I can't invent a tune for it and therefore
 London shall be the great ground-swelling bass
 Through every canto without why or wherefore
 Except to give the genius of place
 Which in my epic I allow its share, for
 I mayn't forget the spirit of the race.
 That spirit made its London, I surmise,
 Because it liked it so not otherwise.

Thou, London, in my orchestra shalt be
 The big bassoon, the plaintive violin
 My Noel, to resolve my harmony
 And help my weary soul and brain to win
 The kingdom of true music where you'll see
 Me as a chamberlain to usher in
 His majesty the poet yet unborn
 Who'll change the crown of laurel for the thorn.

So here we are in London with the ghost
 Of Thackeray still peering through the pane
 To see his crowd of snobs become a host,
 Bohemia vanished ne'er to come again,
 The Bourgeois sea has eaten up its coast,
 And Birmingham has come to Dunsinane.
 In other words, mere money's broken down
 The walls of aristocracy's renown.

London was then still parcelled out—the slums,
 The suburbs and the West were all distinct
 As onions, daisies and chrysanthemums,
 Not seeming even in their perfume linked.
 Yet over London beat the muffled drums,
 And Death the Censor ruthlessly had inked
 The page of more life stories than the gold
 Of England could afford to leave untold.

There was a gloom o'er London as the years
 Crept by and left the Boers still undefeated.
 No glory came to dry a mother's tears
 Or to restore the pride well-nigh unseated
 Of Albion still smarting 'neath the sneers
 With which the Germans and the French had treated
 Her efforts to make Africa all red—
 As though it needed more blood to be shed.

Joubert and Cronje, Botha and de Wet,
 These were the names against which Birmingham
 Put up its list, which *seriatim* met
 Extinction in the agonising "Damn"
 With which the public struggled to forget
 Its sore humiliation in the sham
 Installed as War by patriotic Tories
 Attempting to revive their ancient glories.

An ancient glory like a sleeping dog
 Is better left to lie, for no good thing
 Can be repeated and it never pays to jog
 The past as it is slowly vanishing.
 Its slowness is a necessary clog
 Upon the present, which no doubt would swing
 Along too fast for those whose only notion
 Is to resist the law of change and motion.

It would be cruel if an ancient glory
 Were all we had to live for. If it were,
 Then life would be a sanguinary story
 Of war and rapine, with no pause for air
 And light and sweetness. It would be so gory
 That long ago the counsels of despair
 Would have prevailed and we should have resigned
 Our proud ambition to develop Mind.

For Mind is what we humans don't possess
 In any quantity. There's scarce enough
 To keep us going in the wilderness
 Of houses where we lie and cheat and bluff
 Our way through all the busy throng and press
 With naught to guide us save the very rough
 And ready morals given us in youth
 To be a working substitute for Truth.

Old England then was forced to dish the New
 And tried it in the old time-honoured fashion
 By making war, which is supposed to do
 A lot of good by tapping people's passion.
 It taps their pockets and their senses too
 And lays their feelings bare to those who lash on
 The public in its sentimental gushes
 For which a man who loves his country blushes.

Now there was gloom in London when my Noel
 Was sent from Cambridge, as I have narrated.
 The news was bad. The war refused to go well.
 The gloom was of the kind called inspissated.
 With Higgins nigh forgotten, Baden-Powell
 Alone had any chance of being fêted
 As one whose fame could make all London ring.
 And so all eyes were fixed on Mafeking.

Horse-racing was forgotten. Other news
 Was shifted to the class of "Also ran,"
 For since the hope of modern Waterloos
 Had faded out for every Englishman,
 And Glory still continued to refuse
 Her blessing on ambitions African,
 The nation numbed and sore and mortified
 Clutched hard at this to bolster up its pride.

The British do not know the tragedy
 Of War. It is a melodrama played
 With them as hero in the end to be
 Triumphant—(with a great advance in trade)—
 To fit the laws of stage morality
 By which they think the universe is swayed.
 They've never had War's horrors on their hands
 Because they fight in other people's lands.

The British truly know not what they do.
 They always have some trumped-up moral cause
 Which constantly they keep before their view.
 And when some nation by the lion's paws
 Is torn to bits, like France at Waterloo,
 Then British parsons bid for God's applause
 By saying what the victim might have done
 Had not the matchless British army won.

'Tis easy to be wise when the event
 Is past. But surely better then than never.
 How otherwise can Wisdom's eye be bent
 Upon our ceaseless fatuous endeavour
 To put our dogging Folly off the scent
 Of our hysterical attempts to sever
 The present from the awful consequences
 Of all our foolish ancestors' offences?

Now Noel was not wise before or after
 Or during the event, and nothing knew
 Save, suddenly, that London was all laughter,
 All shouts and cheers and tears, a boiling stew
 Of crazy people daft and growing dafter
 Because the thing they longed for had come true.
 Their greater dreams had been annihilated :
 A small one saved should be well celebrated.

He and a friend of his called Lumley-Jones,
 A sucking barrister, together read
 The posters in their variegated tones
 Of colour, buff, green, yellow, pink and red
 And white and blue, and to their very bones
 These two were thrilled, and Lumley bared his head.
 "By Jove!" he said. "By Jove! the tide has turned
 And now we'll have the burst we've hardly earned."

They caught the fever which like a simoom
 Blew through the London streets and howling sent
 The flooded populace against the boom
 And sluice-gates of society. The pent-
 Up hordes that scarcely had had elbow-room
 Within the narrow channels where they spent
 Their forces, now burst through and nearly drowned
 With licence the new liberty they found.

The British lion straightened out his tail
 In spite of certain knots that still were tied in it.
 The British public had its *Daily Mail*.
 The waking people's raucous voice had cried in it.
 The Education Act had told its tale.
 Old England had committed suicide in it.
 The British lion's roar had lost the note
 Of power that once came baying from his throat.

It sounded now more like a hungry pack
 Of beagles stricken with an itching mange.
 The lion screamed until his voice 'gan crack
 And seemed to be unwitting of the change
 He could not know, for he had turned his back
 On his old self that proudly used to range,
 Disdainful of the jealous smaller fry
 Who hid away whenever he passed by.

But Noel cared not how the lion roared
 So long as roar he did. And Lumley shouted
 And flung his charming manners overboard
 And with the others grunted round and snouted,
 And when he met a woman who ignored
 His charms he would not let himself be flouted
 But urged his suit until he had embraced her,
 Assuring her he was a woman-taster.

"That's my profession," he informed the throng :
 "A woman-taster by appointment to
 His Highness the Surajah of Geelong.
 So come along with me to No. 2
 Pump Court and have a rally of Ping-Pong,—
 As good a name for it as e'er I knew."
 This blameless youth, ascetic as a monk
 In ordinary life, was not yet drunk.

He was delighted like the rest to be
 Absolved for one night only from the tight
 Conventions and the dull monotony
 Of habit. And he revelled in this night
 Of patriotic bestiality,
 In celebration of the speck of light
 That showed at last through the Cimmerian gloom
 To give B.-P. his coveted Press boom.

Unfortunate initials ! B.-P. stands
 For British Public, publicly set up
 'Mid blare and bluster, military bands,
 Illuminated signs, the flowing cup
 And overflowing mug, to make demands
 Of Privilege and force the Lords to sup
 The gall and wormwood of a revolution
 Which sapped all faith in every institution.

When B.-P. was relieved at Mafeking
 The great B.-P. in London was released
 From its subservience to everything
 Victorian, whose burden had increased
 With every year since Albert's soul took wing
 To occupy the marble mansion leased
 In heaven for it by Great Britain's Queen,
 Who thought her people were what he had been.

The howling mob surged westward down the Strand,
 And bugles blew and fireworks exploded,
 And peacocks' feathers passed from hand to hand,
 And women's lust by paper ticklers goaded
 Filled all the air with squeals, hot odours and
 Hysteria that blistered and corroded
 The souls unspotted of our two young men
 Who laughed to see the Mob break from its den.

Jones bought a drum and Noel bought a bugle
 And both wore paper hats and cardboard noses.
 They called themselves MacTavish and MacDougall
 And dangled sporrans made of old tea-cosies,
 To show that they were creatures centrifugal,
 As all men are when puberty discloses
 The all-important final joke of sex
 With which Dame Nature human nature wrecks.

They drummed their way into the Trocadero
 And dined and poured their champagne on the floor
 Or down the waiter's neck and shouted Cheero !
 And rushed at people they'd not met before,
 And saw in every shouting man a hero,
 In every woman a triumphant whore.
 An old man on a table tried to sing
 And vowed he'd just escaped from Mafeking.

Our noble two rushed at the lying fool
 And with the smilax wrested from the table
 Gave him a crown. He shouted for Home Rule
 And said he'd wear the green until the Babel
 Of Parliament was wrecked by ridicule.
 And Noel laughed until he was unable
 To move when the old fool said he was Zambra
 And had to meet Negretti at th'Alhambra.

To maffick and to maffick and to maffick,
 To find some outlet for their long-starved senses,
 This was the purport of that brainless traffic
 In women, wine and laughter that condenses
 In one night's joy that seems to some seraphic
 The horrors bred inside the moral fences
 That make the world a concentration camp
 Where Mrs Grundy rules with Mrs Gamp.

So put the bottle on the mantel-piege
 And we will put our lips to it when so
 Disposed. Meanwhile we'll join the breathless siege
 Laid to the Empire where young lechers go
 To pay the homage due from every liege
 To Venus, Bacchus, goat-foot Pan & Co.
 When bloodless or most bloody fights are won
 To make excuses for licentious fun.

The Empire (music hall) in Leicester Square
 Is British to the marrow while the other
 Is Anglo-Yid. But pious bishops dare
 The greater of these paragons to smother.
 They smile upon the Anglo-Yid, but stare
 In disapproval, and they make a pothor
 About the British where the young man meets
 What else he'll find a-prowling in the streets.

Roll all the Boat Race and the Rugby nights
 Together and 'twere not one twentieth
 Of all the din and row that now affrights
 Each drunken Phryne as she draws her breath
 In almost panic at the awful sights
 That make life seem more terrible than death.
 Respectable old men have run amuck.
 Each thinks himself again a bouncing buck.

Forgetful of their wives, their families,
 Their ponderous careers, M.P.'s and brokers,
 Solicitors and civil servants quiz
 And shout. Their necks swell in their chokers
 As strutting up to Poppy, May or Liz
 They act just like the blackguard Cockney jokers
 Who in the streets outside make obscene japes
 And frighten girls with silly semi-rapes.

The promenade was packed with gaudy, gay
 And half-intoxicated creatures who
 Paid no attention to the acted play,
 But sweated, grunted, shouted View-halloo!
 And visions had of beaten Boers who'd pay
 In blood and tears and gold for the to-do
 They'd caused the Yiddish Empire. No one thought
 Of all the men who'd starved and died and fought.

The drunken Falstaff whom our boys had met
 Like Poins and Hal in Lyons' famous golden
 And gorgonzola halls refused to let
 Them go but laboured to embolden
 Their ardent spirits till they should forget
 Themselves in something worthy of the olden
 Romances of the days before the pious
 Victoria and Albert could belie us.

A vat of scandal was this hoary fool,
 A remnant of the *Pink-un's* palmy days
 When Corlett, Wilde and Pitcher held their school,
 Instructing youth in gaiety and ways
 Of stirring mud up in the stagnant pool
 Of London. He was loudest in his praise
 Of Edward Prince of Wales, who he averred
 Would soon have London from its slumber stirred.

Its slumber? God! Was this then London's sleep,
 This nightmare of a world of whores and knaves
 Whom nothing from their villainy could keep
 While thousands yonder mouldered in their graves?
 The contrast suddenly made Noel weep
 To see how an Imperial race behaves
 When drunk with such a tiny victory
 A thousand leagues away across the sea.

He wept, and Falstaff left him in disgust.
 His tears fell quickly down his pasteboard nose.
 His grief was all the keener for the lust
 Around him and the yells that still arose,
 The smells, the fleshy arms and breasts that thrust
 Themselves upon his senses till his clothes
 Imprisoned him and clung until he felt
 His world and he in such a heat must melt.

Upon his arm a gentle hand was laid,
 A sweet deep voice breathed comfort in his ear.
 "You must not cry," it said, "nor be afraid.
 The end of all this horror must be near."
 He turned and saw in domino a maid
 Who gazed reproach at him with eyes severe
 Yet gentle, and so steady that he shook
 His horror off and what she gave he took—

Her hand : a small firm hand that gripped
 His tightly and then modestly withdrew.
 Away she turned and through the throng she slipped,
 While Noel followed, keeping her in view.
 Away she went and down the stairs she tripped,
 He after, half believing that he knew
 Her, though he could not say her name or where
 In all his life he'd met a soul so rare.

He caught her up and they together plunged
 Into the howling herd that filled the streets.
 To be with her! To be with her! He lunged
 Unconsciously and while his glad heart beats
 In recognition his poor mind is sponged
 Of memory, though his passion stirs and heats
 The funeral baked meats that as a boy
 He fed upon to mourn his murdered joy.

She told him how she'd come out with a party
 To see Great Britain greatly triumph in
 Her victory. Her escort was a hearty,
 Respectable solicitor, whose thin
 And virtuous wife was angular and arty,
 Robed all in green, dependent on a pin.
 Affrighted by the mob, this lady fled
 And left her charge alone. Need more be said?

As she was lovely, dark and very pale
 Save for the flush that tinged her ivory,
 Her beauty was as moving as her tale,
 And Noel's heart grew big with sympathy.
 Such eyes and lips as hers could hardly fail
 To melt a tougher customer than he.
 He told her she need have no smallest fear
 For he that night would be her cavalier.

He slipped away with her and with her hand
 Tucked in his arm they wandered through the streets,
 And every now and then they took their stand
 And watched the mob perform amazing feats
 Of drunken folly, long since out of hand,
 Completely maddened by the printed sheets
 Which made them think the war was justified
 In this debauch of patriotic pride.

Their ears were deafened by the ceaseless roar.
 The mob was like a sea about a wreck
 Tossed up and battered on a sandy shore,
 Or like a brackish flooded mountain beck
 Hurling itself upon a threshing-floor,
 Or like a swarm of rats upon the deck
 Of a great ship with fire in the hold
 Upon a sea wind-swept and icy cold.

Their eyes were aching with the waving flags,
 The glaring lights, the moving sea of faces,
 And Noel felt his soul was torn to rags
 To see the patient mob kick o'er the traces
 What time the linked chain of order sags,
 And ancient idols totter in their places.
 The night that saw this bawdy rowdy fun done
 Enthroned King Mob as ruler over London.

And Noel took his false nose and his cap
 Of many colours and his bugle, and
 He laid them in his fair companion's lap
 As they were driving home, and in her hand
 He laid his cosy-sporran and its strap,
 And asked her if she'd try to understand
 That these were symbols of his vanished youth :
 Mementoes of the night when he met Truth.

"The Mob's a lie," he said, "and feeds on lies,
 For Love is truth and far too delicate
 To be held up for vulgar, greedy eyes
 Bedimmed with all the steamy mists of hate.
 Love's for the young, the good, the brave, the wise,
 The single-hearted who can bear to wait
 Alone if need be for the blessed thrill
 That comes with every kindling of the will.

"Here is no will, but only foul excitement.
 Acceptance of the bloody fragments flung
 Contemptuously down——" His hot indictment
 Burned up his words, and so he held his tongue,
 Not knowing what the things that crossed his sight meant.
 He tried to speak what could be only sung—
 That is, he mumbled vaguely of her kindness
 What time her eyes reproached him for his blindness.

She gathered up the bugle and the nose,
 The sporran and the cap and told the cabby
 To put her down, and when he stopped she rose.
 Then Noel's heart felt spongy, soft and flabby
 To see her going ere he could propose
 Another meeting. Yet he thought it shabby
 To force on her a friendship she'd no wish for.
 Too proud he was a hint from her to fish for.

“At least,” he said, “I think it is a shame
That you and I should part and go our ways
Without my having even learned your name.
You have my nose to mark this day of days,
But you are going even as you came.”
She smiled : “Young Noel ever ever stays
The same.” She disappeared. He recognised
His Katje in a domino disguised.

Katje in London ! Katje in the whirl
Of fury let loose by the villainy
That slew her people ! Katje, the Dutch girl
Whom he had lost so far across the sea.
Out from the cab did frantic Noel hurl
Himself, but she was lost. O misery !
“You bloody bilker,” said the irate cabby,
“It’s always gents as does the downright shabby.”

PUBLISHERS' NOTE

Part One of *Noel*, containing the Introduction (2s. 6d. net.), was published in December last. Part Three, which will contain Cantos III and IV, will be issued shortly.





AA 000 621 376 3

UNIVERSITY OF CA RIVERSIDE LIBRARY
3 1210 01014 8581

